

**I Claim:****1. A surgical retractor, comprising:**

an open-ended hollow sleeve adapted for inserting into a body of a patient at an operating site to hold back surrounding muscle and body tissue, said sleeve defining an enlarged operating portal sufficient to allow entry and manipulation of surgical instruments inside the body; and

said sleeve having a width dimension of at least 50 mm, the width dimension accommodating multiple side by side dilators adapted for stretching the muscle and body tissue at the operating site, such that said surgical retractor is inserted into the body over the multiple dilators and the dilators being subsequently removed to establish the enlarged operating portal.

**2. A surgical retractor according to claim 1, wherein said sleeve has a generally oval cross-section.****3. A surgical retractor according to claim 1, wherein said sleeve has a generally hourglass-shaped cross-section.****4. A surgical retractor according to claim 1, wherein the width dimension of said sleeve is at least two times a depth dimension of said sleeve.**

5. A surgical retractor according to claim 1, wherein said sleeve has a maximum depth dimension of at least 25 mm.
6. A surgical retractor according to claim 1, wherein said sleeve has a length of between 40 and 80 mm.
7. A surgical retractor according to claim 1, and comprising a handle formed with said sleeve for manipulating said surgical retractor inside the body of the patient.
8. A surgical retractor according to claim 1, wherein said sleeve is constructed of a rigid shape-retaining material.
9. A surgical retractor according to claim 1, and comprising an outward-projecting muscle wall located adjacent an open bottom of said sleeve, and adapted to further hold back surrounding muscle and body tissue at the operating site.

10. A surgical retractor, comprising:

an open-ended hollow sleeve adapted for inserting into a body of a patient at an operating site to hold back surrounding muscle and body tissue, said sleeve defining an enlarged operating portal sufficient to allow entry and manipulation of surgical instruments inside the body; and

said sleeve having a width dimension and a depth dimension, the width dimension being at least two times the depth dimension to accommodate multiple side by side dilators adapted for stretching the muscle and body tissue at the operating site, such that said surgical retractor is inserted into the body over the multiple dilators, and the dilators being subsequently removed to establish the enlarged operating portal.

11. A surgical retractor according to claim 10, wherein said sleeve has a generally oval cross-section.

12. A surgical retractor according to claim 10, wherein said sleeve has a generally hourglass-shaped cross-section.

13. A surgical retractor according to claim 10, wherein said sleeve has a maximum depth dimension of at least 25 mm.

14. A surgical retractor according to claim 10, wherein said sleeve has a length of between 40 and 80 mm.

15. A surgical retractor according to claim 10, and comprising a handle formed with said sleeve for manipulating said surgical retractor inside the body of the patient.

16. A method of forming an enlarged operating portal in a body of a patient, said method comprising the steps of:

inserting a first dilator into the body at an insertion site;

inserting a second dilator into the body at an adjacent insertion site;

bringing down an open-ended hollow sleeve over the first and second dilators, and into the body at the insertion sites;

removing the first and second dilators from the body, such that the hollow sleeve defines an enlarged and stable operating portal sufficient to allow entry and manipulation of surgical instruments inside the body at an operating site.

17. A method according to claim 16, and comprising inserting a guide wire through the skin for guiding insertion of the first dilator into the body.

18. A method according to claim 16, and comprising inserting a guide wire through the skin for guiding insertion of the second dilator into the body.

19. A method of forming an enlarged operating portal in a body of a patient, said method comprising the steps of:

inserting a first assembly of progressively larger serial dilators into the body at an insertion site;

inserting a second assembly of progressively larger serial dilators into the body at an adjacent insertion site;

bringing down an open-ended hollow sleeve over outermost ones of the first and second assemblies of serial dilators, and into the body at the insertion sites;

removing the first and second assemblies of serial dilators from the body, such that the hollow sleeve defines an enlarged and stable operating portal sufficient to allow entry and manipulation of surgical instruments inside the body at an operating site.

20. A method according to claim 19, and comprising inserting first and second guide wires through the skin for guiding insertion of respective first and second serial dilators into the body.